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SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ISTANBUL CONFERENCE TACKLES TURKEY'S "KURDISH  
PROBLEM"

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and  
(d).

11. (C) Summary. A March 11-12 Istanbul conference on  
"Turkey's Kurdish Problem" brought together a range of  
leading figures from Turkey's Kurdish community with the  
ambitious goal of hammering out an alternative to the  
leadership of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.  
Organizers argued that the time was ripe for such an  
initiative, crediting both the changed situation in Northern  
Iraq -- where organizers anticipated an autonomous  
"Kurdistan" -- and Turkey's own increasing openness to  
addressing difficult and sensitive issues. While no concrete  
platform emerged, participants were united in condemning the  
PKK and declaring that the period for armed struggle is over.  
Chastened by past experience, however, there was also a  
largely unspoken consensus that the Kurdish problem in Turkey  
will not be resolved in the near future. End Summary.

#### AGAINST VIOLENCE AND EXTREME NATIONALISM

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12. (C) The crucial question before the March 11-12  
conference on civic and democratic resolution for Kurds in  
Turkey, according to Bilgi University Professor and local  
Helsinki Assembly Chairman Murat Belge, was whether Turkey's  
Kurds will continue to take direction from Ocalan, or whether  
they will begin to organize themselves around some new leader  
and modified principles. Participants were united in their  
advocacy of peaceful change through a democratic and  
voluntary alliance. In the run-up to the event, Belge told  
us the conference aimed to bring together exceptional,  
"non-Ocalan people," who, though divergent in opinion, would  
work toward a platform independent of Ocalan's influence.  
These people sensed a changed situation anticipating an  
autonomous "Kurdistan" in Northern Iraq.

13. (SBU) In the event, the two-day program largely tracked  
with organizers' plans. On the opening panel, Sertac Bucak,  
founder and former chairman of the International Center for  
Kurdish Human Rights, accused the PKK of standing in the way  
of a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem and said the  
period of armed struggle was over. Other conference speakers  
criticized hyper-nationalism, both Turkish and Kurdish.  
While declaring the PKK an organization with no democratic  
legitimacy, Professor Ahmet Insel of Galatasaray University  
said Turkish and Kurdish nationalism both led in the wrong  
direction. Baskin Oran of Ankara University, Journalist  
Etyan Mahcupyan and others offered similar criticism.  
Musician Nilufer Akbal put it poignantly, "I want to sing in  
my mother tongue. I want to feel that I belong here.... I'm  
a Kurd but this is my land. I should have the right to  
perform my art in my country." Osman Baydemir, mayor of  
Diyarbakir, summarized the sentiments of many in praising

Prime Minister Erdogan's remarks last August that acknowledged the Kurdish question was a question for all Turks. Baydemir voiced his concern for the future if Turks and Kurds do not assume responsibility for solving the problems of Kurds together.

¶4. (SBU) The only discordant note was sounded by a number of media participants, who missed the earlier sessions and (incorrectly) criticized other participants for complaining about the PKK in private but not in the event's public fora. Syndicated columnist Mehmet Ali Birand added that Kurdish speakers at the conference were confused, not knowing what they really wanted.

¶5. (C) Comment: Like the Armenian conference before it, the March 11-12 Kurdish conference was testimony to the increasing willingness of Turks to tackle even the most sensitive and difficult issues that both divide and define them. The idea of using a two-day event to create an anti-Ocalan platform was undoubtedly overambitious and not a little naive. Yet the event did contribute to dialogue on the issue. The key will be what happens next, and whether the Kurdish leaders and intellectuals who gathered last weekend will continue the search to create a vehicle for their aspirations that steers well clear of its troubled forbearers. There was a clear sense among participants, both Kurdish and otherwise, that a resolution to Turkey's Kurdish problem will not come to pass in the foreseeable future. End comment.

JONES